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SUBJECT: SPOT REPORT: FUNERAL SERVICES FOR PATRIARCH
ALEKSEY II

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11. (SBU) Summary. On December 9, numerous religious leaders, government officials, and Orthodox faithful gathered at Christ the Savior cathedral in central Moscow for the funeral of Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia Aleksey II who died on December 5. Patriarch of Constantinople Bartholomew I, in his first visit to Russia since 1993, officiated the funeral services. Known for his role in resurrecting the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) after the fall of Communism, Aleksey posthumously received high praise for his work in strengthening the ROC's relations with leaders of other faiths. Medvedev and Putin topped a long list of Russian public figures in attendance, and several foreign heads of state and regional leaders offered a final tribute to the late Patriarch at the service. The Ambassador attended the high-profile ceremony that drew several other members of the diplomatic community. End Summary.

World Orthodox Leaders Attend Funeral

12. (SBU) Russian Patriarch Aleksey II's death on December 5 elicited widespread mourning and praise in advance of his funeral on December 9 (reftel). The funeral services at Christ the Savior cathedral in Moscow, officiated by Patriarch of Constantinople Bartholomew I, attracted Orthodox leaders from all over the world. Approximately 1000 people witnessed the ceremony from inside the cathedral, but as many as 10,000 crowded around the outside the secured church perimeter. The most notable Orthodox figures present included Georgian Patriarch Elijah II, Bishop Serafim of Canada, Patriarch Daniel of Romania, Metropolitan Christopher of the Czech Republic and Slovakia, Head of the Armenian Apostolic Church Catholicos Garegin II, Metropolitan Georgios of Paphos (Orthodox Church of Cyprus), Archbishop Anastasios of Tirana, and Archbishop Ieronymos of Athens. Georgian Patriarch Elijah II, who called Aleksey "a great friend of Georgia and of the Georgian Orthodox Church," presided over Georgian-language religious services at Christ the Savior on December 8 (Note: Aleksey refused to recognize the South Ossetian and Abkhazian Orthodox Church's proposed independence after the war in Georgia, professing the need for a mutual decision with the Georgian Orthodox Church based on Church canon). A law enforcement agency spokesman estimated that 82,000 people visited Christ the Savior cathedral between Saturday and early Tuesday morning to give their final tributes to Aleksey II.

13. (SBU) At the conclusion of the funeral service, Russian Orthodox leaders interred the body of Aleksey II, according to his will, at one of Moscow's biggest and most popular churches, Epiphany Cathedral (Bogoyavlenskiy Sobor). Metropolitan Kirill of Smolensk and Kaliningrad, the Patriarchal Locum Tenens or acting Patriarch, said at the burial service that "Patriarch Aleksey had left a new church to the people, different than the one he took over in 1990." The ROC not only enthroned Aleksey in 1990 at Epiphany Cathedral, but it also served as the site of numerous

services conducted by Aleksey, reflecting Epiphany's significance to him. Epiphany became well-known as the site of the most revered icon in all of Russian Orthodoxy, the icon of the Virgin Mary of Kazan, which the ROC used to bless troops in 1612 before a major battle for the liberation of Moscow. Aleksey's two predecessors, Patriarch Aleksey I and Patriarch Pimen, were buried at the Trinity-St. Sergius Monastery.

Government Leaders Remember Aleksey

14. (SBU) Dozens of Russian government leaders, including Medvedev and Putin, mourned the loss of Russia's highest religious figure at the midday funeral. In addition to Russia's two highest leaders, several cabinet ministers, administration advisors, governors, and mayors came to the church. Medvedev noted on December 8 that Aleksey "called for mutual respect, tolerance, and trust among followers of various creeds and traditions and initiated dialogue between Churches and nations," and that he "turned the ROC into a highly respected institution that cooperates fruitfully with the state." Putin called Aleksey a "pure man" who contributed to "the establishment of Russian statehood" in a December 5 statement. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov commented on December 8 that Aleksey was "destined to revive the Russian Church and to bring millions of our citizens back to spiritual sources." Communist Party leader Gennadiy Zyuganov characterized the Patriarch as a person who treated all people equitably despite their political party affiliations and thanked him for adopting the law on the freedom of conscience "that put up a major obstacle to the

MOSCOW 00003564 002 OF 002

onslaughts of sects." Liberal Democratic Party of Russia leader Vladimir Zhirinovskiy called Aleksey's death "the country's biggest loss over the past forty years," specifically appreciating Aleksey's success in reuniting the ROC with the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (ROCOR).

15. (SBU) While the ROC did not issue invitations, several international leaders traveled to Moscow for the funeral. Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenka, Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan, and Serbian President Boris Tadic attended the funeral. Ukrainian opposition leader Viktor Yanukovich and the president from Georgia's breakaway provinces of South Ossetia, Eduard Kokoyty, and Abkhazia, Sergey Bagapsh, also observed the proceedings. The Ambassador joined numerous representatives from the Moscow diplomatic community at the cathedral, and spoke with longtime religious freedom advocate Rabbi Adolph Schneier at the ceremony.

Non-Orthodox Religious Leaders Mourn His Loss

16. (SBU) Numerous religious leaders from outside the Orthodox community gathered to pay their last respects to Patriarch Aleksey. Roman Catholic Church (RCC) Roger Cardinal Etchegaray and Walter Cardinal Kasper represented the Holy See. Russian Council of Muftis head Ravil Gaynutdin recognized Aleksey's "defense of truth" and efforts to separate religion from extremism, terrorism, and crime. He also noted that Aleksey always supported Muslims, even when "the West had shown disrespect for them and when 'cartoon scandals' flared up." Chief Rabbi of Russia Berel Lazar remembered his cooperation with Aleksey at international religious forums, noting that Aleksey earned the respect of all who knew him. Russian Union of Evangelical Christians-Baptists (REUCB) President Yuri Sipko praised the Patriarch's "massive, unifying role in the creation of peace and consensus during the travail of Russian society in the 1990's."

Comment

17. (SBU) Patriarch Bartholomew I's role in officiating the liturgy indicates a possible end to the tensions between Moscow and Constantinople surrounding Ukrainian President Yushchenko's desire to move the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church away from the Moscow Patriarchate. The notable absence of Pope Benedict XVI will not set back Catholic-Orthodox relations, but does reflect the long road ahead in building ties of mutual respect and trust between the two churches, with Aleksey's term marked by an unwillingness to host the Pope in Moscow. ROC officials told us on December 9 that the Holy Synod will not meet on December 10 as originally planned, delaying any election timetable.
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